On being "competitive": the evolution of a word

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Introduction

The communications gap between mainstream economists and the general public reaches its extreme in the realm of mathematical theorizing. Agents in the everyday world may (or may not) act as theory predicts without being even remotely aware of theory. But these same agents, regardless of background, do often use much of the language of economists. My goal in this paper will be to offer a preliminary exploration into the changing importance of certain major economic words over the last century.

"Competition" and its many derivatives will form the centerpiece of the paper. We clearly have an instance here of a word dear to mainstream economists that is at the same time a regular part of most adult vocabularies in the English speaking world. We also have a word that shows up in many different contexts. Firms and markets may be competitive, but so may be sports teams, determined personalities, and institutions usually outside the realm of "the economy."

There are two nearly unrelated antonyms of "competition." The one that is most familiar to economists – "monopoly" – will be the focus of section 2. The one that is likely to come more quickly to mind to non-economists – "cooperation" – will be the focus of section 3. Section 4 will seek to solve some of the puzzles uncovered in the first two sections by noting the gradual expansion in the meaning of "competitive."[1] Throughout the paper, my source for tracing changes in word usage will be the New York Times Historical Newspapers Database. While a limited data source, it provides an excellent starting point for a broader study in rhetorical shifts over the years.[2] Considering that the New York Times has long enjoyed the highest reputation among daily newspapers in the United States, it is not presumptuous to interpret changes in its word usage not as simply brief and fleeting fads, but as serious shifts in ways of thinking about the economy.

Trends in the use of "competition" relative to "monopoly"

Ask almost any economist the opposite of "competition," and the most likely response will be "monopoly." While the broader public is less likely to answer the same way (about which more later), to those raised in nearly any economics tradition, "competition" tends to conjure up industries with many firms and "monopoly" an industry with just one firm.[3]

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[1] For an earlier exploration into the changing meanings of "competitive" within introductory textbooks see D. George, "The Rhetoric of Economics Texts Revisited," in A. Aslanbeigui and M.I. Naples, (eds) *Rethinking Economic Principles: Critical Essays on Introductory Textbooks,* Irwin, 1996.

[2] Among the expressions that I plan to research as part of the broader project are "job creation," "tax burden," and shifts from "greater income equality" to "greater income opportunity.

[3] "Oligopoly" is another example of a "non-competitive" industry, in the traditional sense. Because occurrences of oligopoly were relatively rare in the New York Times, I chose to let "monopoly" stand alone.

Table 1: Selected word usage in *New York Times* by Decade, 1900 -2004

	(1) "Competition"	(2) "Monopoly"	(1) / (2)
2000 – 2004…	33,868	4,800	7.06
1990 – 1999	43,110	6,147	7.01
1980 – 1989	49,199	4,850	10.14
1970 – 1979	39,972	4,410	9.06
1960 – 1969	35,539	4,210	6.50
1950 – 1959	36,282	5,470	6.63
1940 – 1949	29,156	5,753	5.07
1930 – 1939	51,529	8,166	6.31
1920 – 1929	35,703	6,094	5.86
1910 – 1919	20,859	4,440	4.70
1900 – 1909	16,693	4,916	3.40

Source: New York Times Historical Newspapers Database

Table 1 shows the number of times that these two words have appeared in the New York Times, by decade, over the last century and the ratio of the one ("competition") to the other ("monopoly"). Between 1910 and 1969, "competition" appeared between 4.7 and 6.6 times more frequently per decade, a fairly constrained spread. While the relative frequency of "competition" surged between 1970 and 1989, it has fallen back since 1990 to just slightly more than the earlier average.

In Table 2, occurrences of the related *adjectives* have been added to the Table 1 data. Occurrences of "competitive" are now combined with "competition" in column 1 and occurrences of "monopolistic" are combined with "monopoly" in column 2[4] The ratios of column 1 to column 2 now yield a more interesting pattern. From 1900 through 1969 there occurred a gradual rise in the relative frequency of "competition" and "competitive," from 3.66 times as frequent as "monopoly" and "monopolistic," to 7.8 times as frequent. From 1960 through 1989, its relative growth accelerated before falling back since 1990, yet even after this drawback it can be seen that "competition" and "competitive" remains roughly twice as common relative to "monopoly" and "monopolistic" as they were over the first half of the 20th century.

[4] As indicated in column 2 of Tables 2, 3, and 5, "monopolized" is included as another adjective of "monopoly." In the interest of readability, I chose not to specifically mention this in the text, with "monopolistic" alone being mentioned.

Table 2: Selected word usage in *New York Times*, by decade, 1900 -2004

	(1) "Competition" "Competitive"	(2) "Monopoly" "Monopolistic"	(1) / (2)
2000 – 2004	61,360	5,034	12.18
1990 – 1999	86,791	6,591	13.07
1980 – 1989	113,235	5,381	21.04
1970 – 1979	74,329	5,314	13.99
1960 – 1969	58,063	4,860	11.95
1950 – 1959	52,433	6,721	7.80
1940 – 1949	42,561	7,695	5.53
1930 – 1939	63,814	9,816	6.50
1920 – 1929	42,542	6,736	6.32
1910 – 1919	25,027	4,798	5.22
1900 – 1909	18,987	5,194	3.66

Source: New York Times Historical Newspapers Database

Table 3: Selected word usage in *New York Times*, by decade, 1900 -2004

	(1) "Competitive"	(2) "Monopolistic" "Monopolized"	(1) / (2)
2000 – 2004	27,492	346	79.46
1990 – 1999	43,681	552	79.13
1980 – 1989	64,036	589	108.72
1970 – 1979	34,357	916	37.51
1960 – 1969	22,524	625	36.04
1950 – 1959	16,151	1,094	14.76
1940 – 1949	13,405	1,620	8.27
1930 – 1939	12,285	1,675	7.33
1920 – 1929	6,839	931	7.35
1910 – 1919	4,198	654	6.42
1900 – 1909	2,294	629	3.65

Source: New York Times Historical Newspapers Database

Netting out the nouns – "competition" and "monopoly" – from Table 2 yields more striking results. In Table 3, left with just the adjectives, "competitive" in column 1 and "monopolistic" in column 2, a clear increase towards "competitive" throughout the 105 year period emerges, with the 1980s providing a huge leap in what has otherwise been a fairly smooth upward trend. From appearing something less than 10 times as frequently in the 20th century's first half, "competitive" could be observed nearly 80 times as often by the 1990s and 2000s.

Table 4: Selected word usage in *New York Times*, by decade, 1900 -2004

	(1) "Competition"	(2) "Competitive"	(1) / (2)
2000 – 2004	33,868	27,492	1.23
1990 – 1999	43,110	43,681	.99
1980 – 1989	49,199	64,036	.77
1970 – 1979	39,972	34,357	1.11
1960 – 1969	35,539	22,524	1.75
1950 – 1959	36,282	16,151	2.25
1940 – 1949	29,156	13,405	2.18
1930 – 1939	51,529	12,285	4.19
1920 – 1929	35,703	6,839	5.22
1910 – 1919	20,859	4,198	4.97
1900 – 1909	16.693	2,294	7.28

Source: New York Times Historical Newspapers Database

Table 5: Selected word usage in *New York Times*, by decade, 1900 -2004

	(1) "Monopoly"	(2) "Monopolistic" "Monopolized"	(1) / (2)
2000 – 2004	4,766	346	12.18
1990 – 1999	6,167	552	11.17
1980 – 1989	4,886	589	8.30
1970 – 1979	4,602	916	5.02
1960 – 1969	4,376	625	7.00
1950 – 1959	5,958	1,094	5.45
1940 – 1949	6,608	1,620	4.08
1930 – 1939	8,691	1,676	5.19
1920 – 1929	6,040	931	6.49
1910 – 1919	4.329	654	6.62
1900 – 1909	4,624	629	7.35

Source: New York Times Historical Newspapers Database

Whether or not the adjectives of "competition" and "monopoly" are appearing more or less often relative to their nouns requires a different breakdown of the data, and this is done in Tables 4 and 5. As Table 4 reveals, there was a steady rise in the use of "competitive" relative to "competition" from 1900 through 1990. "Competition" went from appearing 7 times as frequently as "competitive" in the 1900s to appearing slightly less than "competitive" by the 1980s. Strangely, Table 5 shows an *opposite* pattern at work for "monopoly." From the 1940s through the present there has been an upward trajectory of the ratio of occurrences of "monopoly" to occurrences of "monopolistic," indicating a relative *decline* in the use of the

adjective. In the 1940s, the noun appeared 3.55 times as frequently as the adjective. By the 2000s, the noun was appearing 13.87 times as frequently.

Summarizing the third column numbers in Tables 4 and 5, the use of "competition" relative to "competitive" was nearly *cut in half* over the 65 year period extending from 1940 through 2004. Over the same period, the use of "monopoly" relative to its adjectives nearly *tripled.* That "competitive" grew in popularity while "monopolistic" was waning in popularity suggests a new meaning was being attached to "competitive" in the popular culture that led to the much greater use of this word. Before getting to this historical trend in more depth, however, it will be helpful to turn to another word that can also serve as an opposite of "competition."

Trends in the use of "competition" relative to "cooperation"

Though it is not obvious, the two noted antonyms of "competition" – "monopoly" and "cooperation" – really share much in common. When "competition" prevails in an industry, the firms that make up the industry are not motivated to act for the benefit of other firms. Rather than "cooperate" with these other firms, they "compete." For an industry to become monopolized is for the many individuals who might otherwise be competing with each other to abandon this stance and agree to contribute to the production of a product and to act in ways that are in the interest of all.[5] Thus, "monopoly" might be said to require lots of "cooperation" between agents and might be understood as just a special case of cooperation that emerges from "competition." More often the "cooperation" that is being referred to has nothing at all to do with monopoly.

Table 6 shows the number of occurrences of "competition" and "cooperation" in the New York Times, by decade, since the turn of the last century. With the Times growing in volume in some periods and contracting in others, it is risky to draw conclusions from trends in the numbers themselves. But analysis of the change through time in the relative use of these two words again provides an interesting story. "Cooperation" grew in relative usage from the 1920s through the 1940s, with "competition" going from being 50 percent more common in the 1920s, to only about two-thirds as common in the 1940s.[6] Beginning in the 1950s, there has been a steady movement in favor of "competition," from being just about as frequent as "cooperation" in the 1950s to being almost three times more common in the 2000s.

[5] Participants in the now monopolized industry will operate in the interest of all fellow participants, not in the interest of the wider society.

[6] I am unable to explain the unusually high ratios from 1900 to 1920 in Table 6. It is apparent from this table and from others that follow that "cooperation" and "cooperative" enjoyed a huge bump in usage beginning in the 1920s.

Table 6: Selected word usage in *New York Times*, by decade, 1900 -2004

	(1) "Competition"	(2) "Cooperation"	(1) / (2)
2000 – 2004	33,668	11,692	2.88
1990 – 1999	43,410	15,120	2.87
1980 – 1989	49,199	20,079	2.45
1970 – 1979	37,972	23,079	1.73
1960 – 1969	39,519	27,153	1.46
1950 – 1959	36,282	38,862	.94
1940 – 1949	29,156	46,092	.63
1930 – 1939	51,529	45,835	1.12
1920 – 1929	35,703	24,287	1.47
1910 – 1919	20,859	2,022	10.32
1900 – 1909	16,693	602	27.73

Source: New York Times Historical Newspapers Database

Table 7: Selected word usage in *New York Times*, by decade, 1900 -2004

	(1) "Competition" "Rivalry"	(2) "Cooperation" "Teamwork"	(1) / (2)
2000 – 2004	44,748	13,428	3.38
1990 – 1999	54,629	17,247	3.37
1980 – 1989	60,760	21,558	2.82
1970 – 1979	50,381	24,017	2.10
1960 – 1969	51,374	27,976	1.84
1950 – 1959	47,856	39,871	1.20
1940 – 1949	39,362	47,201	.84
1930 – 1939	66,075	46,500	1.42
1920 – 1929	48,208	24,812	1.94
1910 – 1919	29,655	2,260	13.12
1900 – 1909	24,127	637	37.88

Source: New York Times Historical Newspapers Database

Table 7 represents an attempt to account for the possibility that a shift toward synonyms may account for some of the change, in the relative frequency of "competition" and "cooperation." "Teamwork" has certainly grown in popularity relative to "cooperation." But including this word in the column 2 count and including "rivalry" in the column 1 count makes little difference in the century long trend. With "rivalry" being much more frequently used than "teamwork," the ratios are larger in every decade shown, but the overall pattern of change remains basically what it was in Figure 6. Once again ignoring the anomalous period from 1900 to 1920, the movement was away from "competition" from the 1920s through the 1940s, and ever more in the direction of competition ever since.

Table 8: Selected word usage in *New York Times*, by decade, 1900 -2004

	(1)	(2)	(1) / (2)
2000 – 2004	130	32	4.06
1990 – 1999	235	71	3.31
1980 – 1989	182	72	2.53
1970 – 1979	121	61	1.98
1960 – 1969	88	72	1.22
1950 – 1959	101	59	1.72
1940 – 1949	80	39	2.05
1930 – 1939	87	69	1.26
1920 – 1929	68	55	1.23
1910 – 1919	39	27	1.44
1900 – 1909	32	18	1.78

Source: New York Times Historical Newspapers Database

Notes: Column 1: Occurrences of “competition among firms,” “competition across firms,” “inter-firm competition,” “business competition.”
Column 2: Occurrences of “cooperation among firms,” “cooperation across firms,” “inter-firm cooperation,” “business cooperation,” “agreements across firms,” agreements among firms,” “inter-firm agreements,” “business agreements”

Table 8 shows trends in more circumscribed uses of “competition” and “cooperation.” As indicated in the figures, it is now just competition between firms and cooperation and agreements across firms that are being counted. While no clear pattern emerges through the 1960s, a strong shift in the direction of competition is again discernible in the years since. From competition being just 1.2 times as common as cooperation in the 1960s, competition became twice as common in the 1970s and fully four times as common in the 2000s. Table 9 adds “rivalry” and “teamwork” to the analysis without changing in any way the basic trends that have appeared. We can conclude that a long-term trend is at work that makes “competition” ever more salient and newsworthy than “cooperation.”

Table 9: Selected word usage in *New York Times*, by decade, 1900 -2004

	(1)	(2)	(1) / (2)
2000 – 2004	170	32	5.31
1990 – 1999	302	72	4.19
1980 – 1989	246	73	3.37
1970 – 1979	175	61	2.87
1960 – 1969	136	73	1.86
1950 – 1959	170	60	2.83
1940 – 1949	134	41	3.27
1930 – 1939	180	71	2.53
1920 – 1929	136	55	2.47
1910 – 1919	87	27	3.22
1900 – 1909	90	18	5.00

Source: New York Times Historical Newspapers Database
Notes: Occurrences of “rivalry” added to column 1 figures from Table 8 and occurrences of “teamwork” added to column 2 figures from Table 8

Table 10: Selected word usage in *New York Times*, by decade, 1900 -2004

	(1) "Competitive"	(2) "Cooperative"	(1) / (2)
2000 – 2004	27,492	5,400	5.09
1990 – 1999	43,681	10,766	4.05
1980 – 1989	64,036	23,858	2.68
1970 – 1979	34,357	18,873	1.82
1960 – 1969	22,524	27,443	.82
1950 – 1959	16,151	20,949	.77
1940 – 1949	13,405	17,627	.76
1930 – 1939	12,285	20,594	.60
1920 – 1929	6,839	12,716	.54
1910 – 1919	4,198	452	9.29
1900 – 1909	2,294	325	7.06

Source: New York Times Historical Newspapers Database

So far in this section, only the noun forms have received consideration. Table 10 shows the trend in the use of the adjectival form of each word, "competitive" and "cooperative." The trend here is in a similar direction to what the earlier tables revealed. The 80 year period from 1920 through 2004 shows a steady trend in favor of "competitive." Prior to 1970, "cooperative" was the more frequently used word, with competitive slowly rising from appearing half as often in the 1920s to four-fifths as often in the 1960s. "Competitive" has been the more common ever since and growing rapidly, to fully five times the frequency of "cooperative" in recent years. Comparing the growth in the relative use of "competition" with the growth in the relative use of "competitive" reveals something of a mystery. The relative use of "competition" was 2.6 times greater in the 2000s than in the 1930s, the relative use of "competitive" fully 8.5 times as great. Comparison of the 2000s with the 1940s tells a similar story, though less dramatic, with "competition's" relative frequency growing by a factor of 4.6, while "competitive's" relative frequency grew by a factor of 6.7. To seek some corroboration of the explosive growth of "competitive" I went to Proquest database, a broader source but one only going back to 1970. The rate of growth was nearly as dramatic. The data presented in Table 11 points to "competitive" steadily gaining on "cooperative" over the entire 35 year period shown.

Table 11: Selected word usage in Proquest, by half-decade, 1970 -2004

	(1) "Competitive"	(2) "Coooperative"	(1) / (2)
2000 – 2004	253,056	50,256	5.03
1990 – 1999	116,640	30,589	3.81
1980 – 1989	39,485	13,779	2.87
1970 – 1979	4,289	1,560	2.74

Source: ProQuest Central Database

The gain in one word relative to another is not *prima facie* evidence that the ascendant word is regarded with favor. As scholars (particularly those lacking citations to their work) sometimes like to point out, there is a problem with using citations as a measure of the worth of scholarship. It is possible for an article or book that becomes "notorious" for its poor methodology, logic, writing style, or whatever else, to be cited precisely because of these shortcomings. Similarly, a word's popularity does not assure that the word is favorably regarded.

Table 12 offers some strong evidence that the rising popularity of "competition" has coincided with greater optimism about its effectiveness and desirability. Column 1 in the table tallies all instances in which "competition" was preceded by "needed," "healthy," "desirable," "necessary," "good," or "constructive." Column 2 shows the number of uses that were preceded by "unneeded," "unnecessary," "destructive," "damaging," "imperfect," "unhealthy," "excessive," or "harmful." Not too surprisingly, in the 1930s with the Great Depression reaching its bottom, the tendency toward a negative description was strongest, with the positive descriptions occurring only 13% as often as the negative. But for *each* of the first eight decades of the 20th century, negative descriptions were more common than in the three decades since. More specifically, positive descriptions occurred just 44% as often as negative descriptions. Since 1980, in contrast, the positive descriptions have been **144%** as frequent. And the trend has been steadily upward during these years, as the numbers in column 3 of the table show. Because these results were so strong while the raw numbers were smaller than in any of the previous tables, I again went to the broader data database, Proquest, for some corroboration of these results. Table 13 shows larger raw numbers and a similar trend.

Table 12: Selected word usage in *New York Times*, by decade, 1900 -2004

	(1) Six positive descriptions of "competition"	(2) Eight negative descriptions of "competition"	(1) / (2)
2000 – 2004	70	20	3.50
1990 – 1999	77	37	2.08
1980 – 1989	110	121	.91
1970 – 1979	60	94	.64
1960 – 1969	71	120	.59
1950 – 1959	72	88	.82
1940 – 1949	61	90	.68
1930 – 1939	50	373	.13
1920 – 1929	43	124	.35
1910 – 1919	29	91	.32
1900 – 1909	24	60	.40

Source: New York Times Historical Newspapers Database

Notes: Positive descriptions include "needed competition," "healthy competition," "desirable competition," "necessary competition," "good competition," and "constructive competition." Negative descriptions include "unneeded competition," "unnecessary competition," "destructive competition," "damaging competition," "imperfect competition," "unhealthy competition," "excessive competition," and "harmful competition"

Table 13: Selected word usage in *Proquest*, by half-decade, 1970 -2004

	(1) Six positive descriptions of "competition"	(2) Eight negative descriptions of "competition"	(1) / (2)
2000 – 2004	604	630	.959
1990 – 1999	321	585	.549
1980 – 1989	134	313	.428
1970 – 1979	11	40	.275

Source: ProQuest Central Database

Notes: See Table 12 notes for the positive and negative adjectives searched.

Table 14: Selected word usage in *New York Times*, by decade, 1900 -2004

	(1) "Competitive"	(2) "Stay competitive" "Remain competitive"	(1) / (2)
2000 – 2004	27,492	548	50.17
1990 – 1999	43,681	823	53.08
1980 – 1989	64,036	708	90.44
1970 – 1979	34,357	223	154.06
1960 – 1969	22,524	226	99.67
1950 – 1959	16,151	56	288.41
1940 – 1949	13,405	17	788.53

Source: New York Times Historical Newspapers Database

As one final bit of evidence that "competition" and "competitive" have grown in status, Table 14 shows the 65 year trend in the use of "stay competitive" and "remain competitive" relative to "competitive." (Occurrences of the phrases were too infrequent prior to 1940 to make them worth including.) As the data indicates, these phrases have gone from occurring just once every 788 times that "competitive" appeared to once every 50 times. And as some reflection should indicate, the use of these phrases almost always has a normative component. To ask if one should "remain competitive" has become as odd as asking if one should remain alive.

We are now in a position to draw some interpretations from three trends noted at the end of the previous section; (1) the rise of "competitive" relative to "competition," (2) the fall of "monopolistic" relative to "monopoly," and (3) the just noted rise in the positive description of "competitive." Why has "competitive" become so often heard and so favorable? What elements of society are served by this popular rhetorical development?

The broadened meaning of "competitive"

Among economists, extending clear back to the writings of Adam Smith, "competition" has been the defining feature required to allow markets to work most effectively. And whether one is speaking of perfect competition or the later introduced "monopolistic competition," competitive industries were necessarily comprised of many firms. "Competitive" was originally nothing more a description of such industries while also serving to describe the firms within them. To describe a firm as "competitive" was to say nothing about the firm considered in isolation. A firm that was "competitive" one day could become a monopolist the next if all its fellow firms were to vanish from the scene. To speak about a competitive firm was to thus to draw on the firm's context, not internal attributes.

Looking at uses of "competitive" in the New York Times in the 1920s can be initially confusing. A 1920 ad states that three salesmen "would like to represent a few high-grade non-competitive firms."[7] Another ad, this one from 1930 announces "floor in exclusive women's specialty shop; excellent opportunity for non-competitive firm to benefit by marvelous clientele."[8] In these instances (and there are many more like these) "competitive" appears to define a relationship between the parties. If we substitute "competing" for "competitive," the writer's intent is better conveyed to the modern reader by employing contemporary language usages. The salesmen are announcing that they would not take on firms from the same industry (whether this industry is perfectly or monopolistically competitive or whether it is oligopolistic). I was able to find this sort of use of "competitive" as late as 1963 when mention was made of employment contracts that specified "employees will not work for competitive firms for a given period."[9]

There is something more at work here than the substitution of "competing" by "competitive." From the fact that we use "competing" today where "competitive" was used in the 1920s suggests, on first consideration, that use of "competing" would have grown more than use of "competitive." But the facts say otherwise. In the 1920s, "competitive" was used 1.3 times as much as "competing. By the 1990s, it was used 3.1 times as much. The fact that the relatively slow-growing "competing" was substituting for "competitive" can be best explained by the increasing reliance on the latter to mean "successful" or "capable of winning."

Around the very time that competitive was used to mean "successful" faith in free market capitalism was plummeting. The following passage from Keynes illustrates how the normative shading of "competitive" was certainly capable of going in a negative direction.

[7] Display Ad 135 – No Title, *The New York Times,* October 15, 1920, p.26.

[8] Display Ad 204 – No Title, *The New York Times,* September 21, 1930, p. W12.

[9] "Who Owns a Trade Secret? No One is Sure Yet," *The New York Times,* March 22, 1963, p.11.

> Competitive wage reductions, competitive tariffs, competitive liquidation of foreign assets, competitive currency deflation, competitive economy campaigns, competitive contractions of new development – all are beggar-my-neighbor descriptions.[10]

By the end of the 1930s and clear through the 1940s, increasing use of "competitive" tended not to denote "destructive," as in the above passage, but "successful." Reporting on the early food store chain, A&P, the reader is told "that it has been impossible for a chain to establish uniform prices and remain competitive."[11] During World War II, the U.S. Gypsum Company took out an ad opposing a ruling of the War Labor Board that gave strength to the union by announcing that "The company desires . . . to remain competitive, and to leave its employees the freedom preserved for them by the constitutions and the bill of rights."[12] Even a head of the Communist Party in Hungary was employing the new use of "competitive" to defend the Soviet system. As quoted in the Times, he reasons that "'we must remain competitive. We can only do this when we accept the new form of agriculture,'" this new form being the "Sovietization of agriculture."[13]

Dictionaries differ in their definitions of "competitive." Some make no mention of "successful" and "able." In its second edition (1989), the Oxford English Dictionary, defines it as "Of, pertaining to, or characterized by competition; organized by competition."[14] The 1956 edition of Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language offers much the same, namely "Of, or pertaining to competition; based on, used in, or resulting from competition."[15] Nary a mention of being "successful" or "capable of succeeding." And it is not just those dictionaries based outside the United States that omit this more recent meaning. The 4th edition of the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2000), mentions "liking competition or inclined to compete" without including a likely successful outcome of the competition in its definition.[16]

The earliest dictionary that I found that included "successful" among its definitions was the 1st edition of the Random House Dictionary of the English Language, published in 1955. As they state, "competitive" can mean "able to attain the desired response or results in a competitive situation, as the prices, services or quality of products of a business organization."[17] That Random House was the apparent first may be partly attributable to the inertia of the earlier dictionaries, since new editions did not always mean a thorough rethinking of previous definitions. Interestingly, it was the New Oxford *American* Dictionary

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[10] Quoted in Charles Merz, "Consulting at a Sick World's Bedside," *The New York Times*, July 31, 1932, p.
BR10.

[11] Desplay Ad 15 – No Title, *The New York Times,* March 2, 1943, p. 13

[12] "A&P Ends Buying From packers Who Pay Brokerages on Sales," *The New York Times,* January 21, 1940, p. 32.

[13] Albion Ross, "Hungary to Push Land Cooperatives," *The New York Times,* November 28, 1948, p.1.

[14] *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2nd ed., 1989, Oxford University Press.

[15] *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language,* 2nd. Ed., 1956, G&C Merriam Comp., Pub., Springfield, IL.

[16] *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language,* 3rd ed., 1992, Houghton-Mifflin, p. 385.

[17] *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language,* 1966, New York: Random House, p. 385.

(2001, my emphasis) that, unlike its British counterpart, defined "competitive" similarly, namely, "as good as or better than others of a comparable nature."[18] Some dictionaries were less categorical in their introduction of the new definition. While for Random House, "competitive" could mean "able to attain the desired response," others were more circumspect. The Chambers Concise Dictionary (1991), defined competitive "(of e.g. price) such as to give a chance of successful result."[19] No guarantee of success, just a chance. The 11th edition of Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2003) defines "competitive" as "inclined, desiring, or suited to compete."[20] To be "suited" can, of course, be subject to a range of interpretations, but usually does not mean the competitor necessarily sees much chance of coming out on top. In short, Merriam-Webster would be prepared to offer its definition of "competitive" to a sports team that is universally regarded as incapable of winning the crown, whereas Random House, for example, would be obligated to withhold the "competitive" description from such a team.[21] An even stronger link between "competitiveness" and success is made by Robert Z. Lawrence. Writing in the conservative *Concise Encyclopedia of Economics,* Lawrence puts to rest and notion that the worthiness of competitiveness might be drawn into question. In his words,

> "Competitiveness," particularly with reference to an entire economy, is hard to define. Indeed, competitiveness, like love or democracy, actually has several meanings. And the question "Is America competitive" has at least three interpretations: how well is the United States performing compared to other countries? How well has America performed in international trade? Are we doing the best we can?[22]

The nature of the forces behind the expanded definition of "competitive" is more than can be taken up here. But consider now the propaganda effects that the new meaning of "competitive" has likely had. Prior to the introduction of "competitive" as "successful," economists generally defined the word one particular way ("an industry with many firms," "any firm within said industry") while the general public tended to define it another way, namely, "trying hard to succeed." While these definitions are quite different, I am unaware of any mischief done by conflating these uses. Trouble begins when the more recent usage comes into the picture.

Being "competitive" in the sense of "successful," if conflated with "competitive" in the sense of "trying hard," can create a habit of thinking that "to try" is "to succeed." To announce that a firm, or an athlete, was very "competitive" would seem odd to many, if such an announcement was accompanied by another announcement that the athlete had finished way

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[18] *The New Oxford American Dictionary,* 2001, Oxford University Press, p. 350.

[19] *Chambers Concise Dictionary,* 1991, W&R Chambers Ltd., p.210.

[20] *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary,* 11th ed., Merriam-Webster, Inc., Springfield, MA, p. 253.

[21] A late as 1964 the practice of using "competitive" to mean something other than "trying hard" was apparently still not common, at least in the *Times.* Speaking for the Notre Dame football team of that year, the quote appears "Parseghian says we'll have a 'competitive' team." The quotation marks suggest that the writer of the article was not particularly comfortable with the intended meaning of the word. (See Lincoln A. Werden, "Notre Dame to 'Consider' Bowl Bid if Title is at Stake," *The New York Times,* October 27, 1964, p. 48.)

[22] Robert Z. Lawrence, "Competitiveness," in *The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics,* Liberty Fund, Inc. 2002. http://www.econlib.org.

back in the pack. This can have the unfortunate effect (common with many students) of believing that "trying hard" is a sufficient condition for success. At a broader level, it can create the illusion that creating opportunities for excluded groups to participate "on a level playing field" will result in their success. Since they can now be "competitive" in the sense of "trying hard" they can be "competitive" in the sense of "winning," can't they?

As ideologically loaded as the above may seem, there is an even more curious effect of the introduction of the new meaning of "competitive." Paradoxically enough, the firm that manages to become the only seller (an economist's "monopolist") or the firm that manages to be one of just a few sellers (an economist's "oligopolist") now qualifies for the title of "very competitive firm" since it's the only one (or one of a few) that managed to survive the competitive struggle. Amazingly, the firm that is least able to be described as "competitive" by the old definition (a single firm in a sea of many firms) now is most able to be described as "competitive" by the new definition (a "victorious" or "most able" firm). This is a coup d'état writ large. The Achilles heel of market advocates, that competitive industries would disappear as concentration and monopolization occur, has been turned on its head. Those who embrace competition are now able to point to the large monopolist and large oligopolist as a clear example of what it means to be "competitive."

We now have an explanation for the paradoxical trends in Tables 4 and 5 that were mentioned earlier. To again summarize, "competition" went from being mentioned approximately 7 times more often than "competitive" in the first decade of the 20th century to just above 1.2 times more often in the first decade of the 21st. But "monopoly" went from being mentioned approximately 7 times more often than "monopolistic" in the first decade of the 20th to *12* times more often in the first decade of the 21st. As the discussion suggests, two forces explain the relative rise of "competitive." First, it has taken on a new meaning – "successful" – and is increasingly used to mean this. Second, firms that might have been described as "monopolistic" at one time (and might still fit this definition) can also now be described as "competitive" and are frequently being described as such. Thus when an adjective is needed to refer to a monopolist, where "monopolistic" may have been selected once, "competitive" is an option now, an option that places the monopolist in a far more flattering light.

Conclusions

My focus to this point has been limited to "competition." In closing I will attempt to broaden the focus by briefly studying the context in which "competition," rhetorically speaking, has flourished. Coincident with the popularity of "competition" has been an increasing focus on "markets," for it within market settings, after all, that the economic competition can occur. Table 15 shows the trend in the relative frequency of "government" and "market" over the last century. Since the 1940s, the trend has been fairly steadily in the direction of markets. From "government" appearing twice as often in the 1940s (with WWII probably contributing to this), "markets" have been making steady gains, occurring more often than "government" for the first time in the 1980s and reaching its relative peak in the 2000s. The significance to be placed on this depends on a closer reading of the uses over time, but it is something of a surprise that the relative decline of government, rhetorically speaking, began as far back as it did. By conventional thinking, at least among economists, the 1930s and 1940s provided the

events that led to an ever larger governmental presence in the economy – an advance only beaten back with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. It clearly began prior to this.[23]

Table 15: Selected word usage in *New York Times*, by decade, 1900 -2004

	(1) "Government" "Governments" "Governmental"	(2) "Market" "Markets"	(1) / (2)
2000 – 2004	137,760	193,194	,713
1990 – 1999	191,477	197,860	.968
1980 – 1989	240,207	255,549	.940
1970 – 1979	239,170	200,401	1.193
1960 – 1969	255,870	194,360	1.315
1950 – 1959	265,774	163,055	1.630
1940 – 1949	286,125	147,768	1.950
1930 – 1939	282,553	185,221	1.525
1920 – 1929	203,384	167,286	1.216
1910 – 1919	147,849	82,815	1.786
1900 – 1909	87,453	65,151	1.342

Source: New York Times Historical Newspapers Database

Table 16 provides further substantiation of the advances of the economic relative to the political. In the 1900s and 1910s, the political description of the individual as a "citizen" or a "voter" was twice as common as the economic description of the individual as a "consumer" or "customer." Over the next 20 years the descriptions were approximately at parity. But from 1940 through the 1980s, the economic descriptions gained steadily on the political. While there has been a slight rebound since 1990, the "consumer-customer" remains more than twice as frequently mentioned as the "voter-citizen."

Table 16: Selected word usage in *New York Times*, by decade, 1900 -2004

	(1) "Citizen" "Voter"	(2) "Customer" "Consumer"	(1) / (2)
2000 – 2004	63,554	146,332	.434
1990 – 1999	67,992	146,098	.465
1980 – 1989	73,063	183,831	.403
1970 – 1979	76,482	194,530	.394
1960 – 1969	79,645	138,115	.577
1950 – 1959	71,544	93,272	.767
1940 – 1949	66,044	74,353	.888
1930 – 1939	76,264	69,288	1.101
1920 – 1929	63,901	64,158	.926
1910 – 1919	73,126	32,751	2.232
1900 – 1909	41,718	23,020	1.812

Source: New York Times Historical Newspapers Database

[23] David Harvey dates the birth of neoliberalism all the way back to 1947 with the founding of the Mont Pelerin Society. (David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neolilberalilsm,* Oxford University Press, 2005.)

Table 17: Selected word usage in *New York Times*, by decade, 1900 -2004

	(1) "Citizen"	(2) "Voter"	(1) / (2)
2000 – 2004	30,906	32,648	.947
1990 – 1999	41,153	26,839	1.553
1980 – 1989	49,121	23,942	2.052
1970 – 1979	52,605	23,877	2.203
1960 – 1969	56,503	23,142	2.242
1950 – 1959	53,929	17,615	3.062
1940 – 1949	52,538	13,506	3.890
1930 – 1939	57,442	18,822	3.052
1920 – 1929	46,719	17,182	2.719
1910 – 1919	39,647	9,857	4.022
1900 – 1909	33,479	8,239	4.063

Source: New York Times Historical Newspapers Database

Even within the political description of the individual, there has been a net gain for the more "consumer-like" public personality. As illustrated in Table 17, "citizen" appeared twice as often as "voter" a century ago, but there has been a fairly steady movement in favor of the "voter" ever since. Since 2000, "voter" for the first time appears more often than "citizen." Particularly since the rise of public choice theory, the voter has come to be portrayed as a self-interested "chooser." The "citizen" in contrast, besides being nearly never part of an economist's vocabulary, connotes a non-self-interested disposition. We are thus left with still more evidence that the traditional economic way of thinking gains strength in the general press.

Summing up this final section, over the period when the use of "competition" and related words was growing much faster than "monopoly" and "cooperation," other changes in the popularity of words were occurring that were consistent with this trend. Markets were becoming more often mentioned than government, consumers and customers more often mentioned than citizens and voters (and voters mentioned more often than citizens). The neoliberal drift which by all appearances will be threatened in the years ahead has had a long legacy indeed.

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